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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 0336
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C O N F I D E N T I A L TBILISI 002181

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: BAGAPSH WINS IN ABKHAZIA

REF: TBILISI 2083

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Kent Logsdon for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (SBU) According to the "central election commission" of Abkhazia, incumbent "president" Sergey Bagapsh won the "presidential elections" in Abkhazia on December 12 with 59.4 percent of the vote, avoiding the need for a run-off. There was a striking dichotomy in official Georgian reaction to the "election," showing the ongoing discussion in Tbilisi with how best to engage the breakaway regions. While a Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement termed the elections "illegal," Minister for Reintegration Temur Yakobashvili struck a more moderate tone, expressing hope that Bagapsh could establish a "comfortable" relationship with Tbilisi since he is the most "comfortable candidate" for Moscow. The other candidates received the following percentage of votes: Raul Khajimba - 15.4 percent; Zaur Arzinda - 10.8 percent; Besla Butba - 7.9 percent; and Vitaly Bganba - 1.5 percent. Khajimba, Arzinda and Butba have issued complaints alleging violations, including voter list tampering and removal of ballots from precincts in Gagra, Gudauta and Gali. Former "vice-president" Khajimba, reportedly said that "a large quantity of violations could serve as a detonator of the tension of the situation."

12. (SBU) According to the commission, 100,700 people voted, which is 73 percent of those eligible. Bagapsh's administration claimed that 60 percent of the 3,500 eligible voters in Gali district cast ballots, along with over 1,000 people in each of the two precincts in Russia, Moscow and Cherkessk. One Abkhaz de facto authority website indicated that 83 observers from 21 countries were present and did not observe any violations. Bagapsh's website (www.abkhaziagov.org) indicated that 16 international observers from 12 countries, including the United States, were accredited to Abkhazia's mission of foreign observers and reported no violations. There have been a handful of news reports stating that two U.S. citizens, representing an international NGO, were among the observers. The Georgian MFA issued an appeal to the international community to give a "proper assessment" of this "farce" of an election.

13. (C) Comment. We expect that with his re-election, Bagapsh's policies will remain the same; maintaining strong ties with Russia while seeking engagement with the West. Although the MFA's statement was likely designed to shore up international support for Georgia's position, and worded in a way designed primarily for domestic consumption, Yakobashvili's comments seem to fit in with the Government's more recent initiative of engaging with the Abkhaz (see septel). We have seen no evidence of an increase in tensions in the region due to the election results. There should be additional information about possible fraud allegations available in the coming days, but thus far there is little concrete information available. According to UNHCR, although

there were only 3,500 people eligible to vote in Gali, twice as many ballots were sent there, while in other parts of Abkhazia, ballots were in short supply. End comment.
BASS